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ABSTRACT

Testing guidelines based on teachers' experience and on a review of literature concerning approaches to the testing of oral second language skills, are presented in this paper. Considerations in developing the test included coordination with the syllabus, choice of format, grading, and administration. Suggestions are offered from the practices of an individual instructor. A weighted rating scale consisting of five major criteria (communication, grammatical accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation) is also presented. A brief bibliography is included, and lists of possible test formats for one speaker and interactive formats for two speakers are appended. (MSE)

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CONDUCTING AND EVALUATING ORAL TESTS IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Recent emphasis on teaching for oral proficiency in students have made it necessary for teachers to develop effective and practical means of testing and documenting their students' oral progress in a second language. In devising an effective evaluation program there are many factors for the teacher to consider. Among these are format, length, criteria for grading, and weighting of the criteria. This paper presents an overview of the various factors and options apparent in the literature, and also outlines a program of testing speaking. This program has been implemented and modified for the past six years. Exact procedures are described, and a sample rating scale is provided. References, sample testing materials, and recommendations for further research are included.

Second language professionals have long recognized the importance of the development of speaking skill in their students. Since the Army Language Program of World War II a variety of approaches have been tried. It is only with the advent of the oral proficiency-oriented approach that there has been a major effort to test, evaluate, and document the progress in speaking skills. Testing speaking skill has been difficult for a variety of reasons. In cases of large numbers of students there has been little time to do regular periodic one-to-one testing. Further, the speaking skill, more than any other skill or knowledge area, is difficult to grade because the performance is integrative and fleeting. Finally, there has been uncertainty on how to test.

It has been recognized that at this time there is extensive information about the Oral Proficiency Interview test used by the government, and formulated for academic use by the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages and the Educational Testing Service. However, it can be readily seen that this test is not appropriate or feasible for periodic testing during a semester. It requires too much time and it does not provide small units of specific information about student progress. Other possibilities are available now. The frameworks developed by Krashen and Terrell (1983), and by Omaggio (1983, 1986) have facilitated progress in oral communication testing. The work of the Foreign Service Institute, the Educational Testing Service, and the American Council on Teaching foreign Languages has added to the measurement of oral production progress.

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A brief review of the literature reveals a variety of approaches to administer proficiency-oriented achievement tests of speaking skills. Such tests can be taped or live face-to-face interviews (Valdman, 1981) focusing on interactive format and situation role plays. They can comprise picture-based and topic- based speaking tasks (Linder, 1977) which are appropriate for measuring non-interactive speaking skills. There are a variety of approaches to score such tests, although most schemes studied are based on a fixed limited set of weighted criteria. According to Higgs and Clifford (1981), the most significant criteria for early learner-acquirers of a language are knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Fluency and pronunciation are of less importance.

The review of the literature includes the references used to develop a program of oral testing. This paper presents the testing guidelines developed and an assessment of the success of their implementation. A significant number of teachers have been trained to use the speaking-testing via workshops and graduate courses. This has provided an opportunity for teachers to provide input and therefore, modify these oral testing guidelines.

The Syllabus

The first step in initiating such a program is to fit the oral testing into the "course-grade" portion of the unit plan or syllabus along with the other elements of the evaluation system. Of particular interest here is the relationship of the speaking test to other elements of testing. The program for first-year language includes: 1) three oral tests, each 10% of the course grade, 2) three written tests, each 10% of the course grade, 3) four other items at 10% each and 4) workbooks, homework, quizzes and oral practices. The written tests comprise listening comprehension (30%), reading comprehension (15%), vocabulary (20%), grammar (10%), and composition (15%).

Test Format

The second step in initiating the program is to design the oral test format. Oral class activities are used as the pool of test items. For example, if between testing sessions the students have several interviews and engage in roleplaying activities, then, short oral reports, picture-description activities, personal questions, situation descriptions, pictures and report topics can become the actual test items. The students receive copies of the cue lists of cards for all the personal questions and situations. They also receive a set of

the pictures and a list of the topic descriptions which they have used during the class activity phase. These materials are used to practice with their fellow students during class time, to study individually or in pairs, and to prepare for class. For the oral test the instructor cuts up all the items into individual cards which are placed in a bag or box. Students draw a card from the bag and perform accordingly. This approach allows students to become familiar with the format and the teacher does not have to create new test material. Therefore, students are disposed to participate wholeheartedly in oral activities in class and to review their oral materials.

Students performing in pairs can draw two interview cards or two situation cards per pair, and are instructed to conduct a total of three exchanges per student for each situation. Thus, the teacher is grading six lines per individual. Students working individually are instructed to say six things about their topics/picture and for consistency are graded on three lines each. The teacher reads to each student his/her card if non- reader. Students can choose their own partners or work with one assigned by the teacher. (See the Appendix for examples of the material used.) A key factor in this approach is that students speak, and teachers evaluate therefore, much time is saved. A class of thirty students can accomplish a testing performance in one and one-half hours.

The teacher must also decide how this production is to be graded. Consistency is important. The process is somewhat subjective; but by having a well-defined, consistent approach to grading, the instructor can minimize subjectivity. A standard or teacher made rating scale can be used. The scale should reflect the relative value or weight of each criterion. Most scales for first year language look something like the following:

Name:_____Date:_____Score:_____

Notes:

1. Communication Is the utterance suited to the communicative purpose? Is the student talking about the right thing? Can he/she say something? Does he/she understand the partner?	40 36 32 28 24 20
2. Accuracy (grammatical correctness)	20 18 16 14 12 10
3. Fluency (flow vs. hesitation)	10 8 6 4 2 0
4. Vocabulary (adequate vs. inadequate)	20 18 16 14 12 10
5. Pronunciation (good to bad)	10 8 6 4 2 0

The instructor decides how to score. If a student misses one utterance completely, the instructor determines how many points the flaw is worth and lowers the maximum possible score. Each instructor has to make equivalent decisions. The scale can be modified for each succeeding semester's work. As students progress, a different set of criteria and/or a different relative weighting system may be used.

In addition to circling a number in each category after the student's performance, the teacher may want to keep notes. These notes prove useful for error analysis and self correction. A copy of the grading slip with comments from the teacher can be given to the student .

A variety of approaches have been tried for administering the test. The teacher must decide whether to test live or to grade taped material. There are advantages to both approaches. Tape testing can be done by individuals or pairs while the teacher conducts class. Students tend to be less nervous about performing for a tape recorder than for the teacher. Testing live goes more rapidly and does not require time away from school for grading. It is

easier to understand the performance, and there is no danger of mishap or of tape/machine failure. Further, the teacher is available to help in case of break-down, so the test can continue. Testing live can be done during a written test or during individual reading/writing activity time when the students are otherwise occupied. Students, meet with the teacher individually, in pairs, or in small groups. A larger group can test together even more rapidly. The students simply ask/answer in a clockwise rotation until all of the material they need to be evaluated on has been completed. Oral testing over given material can precede or follow the written test. Testing time and location is arbitrary. Time constraints frequently limit testing to one and one-half class hours. The amount of material/activities to be covered for the semester must be adjusted to allow time for the inclusion of this important testing.

Conclusions

In an era when oral work is a large component of second language study, oral testing is necessary for evaluating student performance. Students tend to dismiss oral activities if the material or skill is not evaluated. In addition, in order to be pedagogically correct, the material taught must be tested. In response to both student interests, and curricular and real-life requirements the development of the speaking skill must be emphasized. An effective approach to evaluating student progress toward that goal needs to be identified and implemented.

Students have responded favorably to the oral-proficiency emphasis and to speaking tests. Students have centered their second language goals on oral production instruction and they appreciate teaching and evaluation processes that are congruent with their own goals. Younger students delight in demonstrating their ability to communicate orally successfully. The more reticent older ones overcome their fears, and are bolstered and made proud by their successes. They give the impression of being satisfied with the procedure described here, finding it related to classwork. Moreover, they appear to be satisfied with the grading procedure and the results generated. Students seem to be accomplishing more in terms of acquisition of the speaking skill and the ability to use it in real-life situations. Overall, the results of the implementation of this approach to testing oral production appear to be satisfactory.

Implications

It is evident that there is a need for further comparative research. The literature on proficiency-oriented testing to date is largely descriptive, explaining the ways in which this task is being accomplished by a variety of professionals in the field. This article adds to that body of informaiton by describing a particular field-tested approach that is especially tailored to facilitate fair, effective, frequent and time-efficient speaking testing.

A variety of useful input on apparently effective ways to test speaking in the classroom is at our disposal. Therefore, there is no longer any excuse for failing to honor the sound pedagogical given that we must test what we teach and teach what we test. Speaking is an early and significant focus in the acquisition of a second language and thus, also in testing of the second-language.

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APPENDIX

INTERACTIVE FORMATS FOR TWO SPEAKERS

Interview Cards

Example: The family. [theme at various levels (3 exchanges)]

I. 1. How many people are there in your family?

2. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

3. What do your parents do?

II. 1. Who reads the most in your family?

2. What does he/she like to read?

3. How many hours a week does he/she read?

III. 1. Where did your family come from originally?

2. When did they come here?

3. In what parts of the country do you have family today?

IV. 1. What is the significance of the family?

2. How do you think your family has changed in the U.S.?

3. What do you think will happen to the family?

Situation Cards

Example: Shopping.[theme at various levels (3 exchanges)]

I. You go into a variety store. Greet the clerk and ask where the notebooks are. Ask the price and then buy one.

You are a clerk in a variety store. Greet your customer and offer to help him/her. Find out what he/she wants, show it to

him/her, and tell him/her the price. Take the money, thank him/her and say goodbye.

II. You go into a variety store to buy a gift for your neighbor's birthday. You have seven dollars to spend on her. Explain the occasion, and ask the clerk what she suggests. You do not want clothing or books.

You are a clerk in a variety store. Your customer wants a gift for a girl. You suggest a blouse first. Later you suggest a book. Finally you suggest earrings and records. Give the price for each item you suggest.

III. You go to a dress store to return a dress you bought for your mother that does not fit and that has a spot on it. You want your money back.

You are a clerk in a dress store. Your customer wants to return a dress. You suggest exchanging the dress because your manager does not allow refunds.

IV. You go into a computer store to buy a unit that will let you handle your income taxes, your family budget and your insurance inventories. Ask about the features available and the prices.

You are a clerk in a computer store. Find out what your client wants, and discuss different types of equipment and features. Discuss prices and arrange an appointment for a demonstration session for the client.

INDIVIDUAL SPEAKER FORMATS

Topics for Elaboration

Example: Schooling. [a topic at different levels]

I. Describe in six or more sentences your school, the number of students, and courses you take at different hours.

II. In six or more sentences, tell about your schooling up to this point; where you attended, what you studied, what successes you had.

III. In six or more sentences, explain the standard school curriculum at your level, what it comprises, and why each element is included.

IV. In six or more sentences, cite what is wrong with U.S. public education and what should be done to improve it.

Pictures for Elaboration

Examples: A color picture of a man and a woman. They are talking and are seated around the table, which is in a fully furnished room with a winter landscape visible. [a topic at different levels]

I. In six sentences tell what you see in the picture: people, objects in the room, colors, etc.

II. In six or more sentences tell what is going on in the picture; what is the occasion ,what are the people talking about, and where are they.

III. In six or more sentences make up a story about the people in the picture. Tell who they are, where they found some of the objects, what happened to them for several hours before this scene, and what they are discussing and planning.

IV. In six or more sentences analyze the composition of the picture: how it could be arranged for more effective use of color, more effective use of the furniture and other objects, for more comfort, etc.